

This is definitely lower Clark

Aiming to ease traffic at one of the city's busiest intersections, transportation officials are planning to dig out a new Clark Street beneath Roosevelt



Photo by Josh Hawkins

Right now, some 4,900 cars pass through the Roosevelt and Clark intersection during rush hour. Transportation officials say that number will be 6,300 in another seven years.

By LYDIALYLE GIBSON
Staff Writer

Simply put, the intersection of Roosevelt Road and Clark Street is a mess. Most any hour of the day, cars inch beneath stoplights on their way into or out of—or across—the South Loop. But during the afternoon rush, when motorists by the thousands head for Roosevelt's exits onto the Dan Ryan and Lake Shore Drive, and Clark Street's straight shot north and south, traffic positively gnarls its way through the crossway.

"There are 50,000 vehicles in that intersection on weekdays," said Brian Steele, a spokesman for the city's Department of Transportation. "One of the problems is that from State going all the way west to the river, Clark Street is the only other through street that connects to Roosevelt. The next street is Canal, which is several blocks away. There are times of the day when cars have to wait through two or three cycles of the traffic light to get through."

But CDOT officials hope to offer a little relief. With plans to start drilling into the asphalt by the end of this year or the start of next, CDOT higher-ups mean to remake the intersection between Roosevelt and Clark. According to Steele, plans call for Clark Street, which right now rises to meet Roosevelt high above the former rail yards of the South Loop, to run beneath Roosevelt Road. Built at grade level, two southbound lanes and a single

northbound one would carry traffic below the intersection's stoplights without interruption. A pair of ramps on each side would bring local traffic up to Roosevelt to turn left or right.

According to Steele, the \$15 million project will likely take a year to finish—CDOT officials hope to have traffic flowing again before a scheduled reconstruction of the Dan Ryan in 2005. Designs, he said, are right now only 30 percent complete. CDOT officials expect to flesh out the particulars after a public meeting they'll convene this summer.

"Our experience has been that input from the neighborhood at meetings impacts how a project proceeds," Steele said. "People ask questions like, 'What can you do to make sure traffic is not backed up during construction?' 'What about crosswalks and bike lanes?' But the basic concept is there and that's what we're pursuing."

All well and good, said Steve Ward, a neighborhood resident and a board member of the Greater South Loop Association. But he's wary of turning Clark Street into something akin to an expressway. Already, he said, the road cleaves the South Loop, dividing the eastern bulk of high-rises and storefronts from the South Branch and the acres of as-yet uncivilized weeds and wilderness west of Clark.

"We'd rather see Clark become more of a neighborhood street, and less like a commuter artery and ramp off the Dan

Ryan," said Ward, noting he'd seen no plans as yet. "It's not so much the volume of traffic, but the speed of the traffic and the conditions of the road."

GSLA members have even talked to city officials about painting a few parking spots onto a widened Clark Street, according to Ward.

"On-street parking more than anything else creates a sense of walkability," Ward said. "Drivers instinctively slow down. ... The more Clark is like an expressway, the more formidable it is psychologically. Having said that, it doesn't mean that this tunnel can't be put in and have everything like we like to see it. It's a self-fulfilling prophesy. If you build it like a highway, people will use it like a highway."

"I think a tunnel is not inherently bad—I'm just concerned about having another barrier to those east-west connections," Ward said.

Valerie Antimuro, whose Dearborn Park I town house squats between Roosevelt Park and the rising incline of Clark Street, said she's reserving judgment for now on Clark's subterranean plunge. She's hopeful about at least one thing, though.

"I do remember when they did tear down Roosevelt Road to fix it, and they did send the traffic down Clark Street at grade level, and to be perfectly honest with you, it was a lot quieter," Antimuro said. "Right now Clark Street is at level with our bed-

room windows, and if they built a sound barrier wall, I don't think I would be opposed to it, especially if it was a halfway decent-looking sound barrier wall. Because it was really quiet here, and then the traffic went back above grade, and it got so noisy."

CDOT's plans come on the heels of publicly announced and applauded plans to build a Target store on the northwestern corner of Roosevelt and Clark, and rumors of a 300,000-square-foot Ikea perhaps bound for a fallow swath across the street, on 62 acres of property purchased last year by Rezmar Corp. (Officials from Rezmar, Ikea, and the city's Department of Planning and Development couldn't be reached for comment this week.) Steele insisted CDOT wasn't responding to any coming development in particular, big box or otherwise, but that the time had simply come. Right now, 4,900 cars pass through the intersection during each rush hour, he said, and by 2010, CDOT engineers predict, that number will be closer to 6,300.

"The South Loop has grown exponentially," Steele said. "The need is there."

Bonnie Sanchez-Carlson, executive director of the Near South Planning Board, said she hadn't seen CDOT's plans, but she seconded the neighborhood urgency of swelling traffic.

"Traffic is a big concern in the area, and anything proposed needs to take it into consideration," Sanchez-Carlson said.

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